

Diary Entry March 25, 1942¹

by

Arthur N. Prior

A night or two back I spent a little while gazing affectionately at a little row of some of the theological books I've brought up here – all the ones that contain statements, outlines or elaborations of the whole Calvinistic theological system rather than of particular doctrines. The Standards framed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines; A.F. Mitchell's collection of 17th century catechisms², including that of the Covenanter Rutherford³, which displays his whole "system" as none of his larger works do (except possibly "The Covenant of Life Opened"); Principal Hill's three volumes of Lectures on Divinity⁴; Adam Gib's "Sacred Contemplations"⁵; Thomas Crawford's "The Mystery of Christianity"⁶; Barth's Dogmatics⁷. And I resolved to add to this collection of by buying Turretin's old Latin Dogmatics⁸ at Newbold's next time I'm in Dunedin.

A relapse into Christianity? No. The intensity of my interest in the subject, and my desire to "complete the set" with Turretin, puzzled me a bit though. I decided that my interest in theology was now like that of an art connoisseur – I collected theological systems as another man collects pictures. I went on to try and analyze what this approach to theology really meant, and recalled Freud's description of art as a field in which, to escape the unsatisfactoriness of reality, we indulge freely in illusions which however, we recognize to be such. (Coleridge's "willing suspension of unbelief") Well, I thought, there was something in that – I could enjoy the theologian's story of God's dealings with man much as one enjoyed a good play or novel. But I was sure that wasn't the whole story. Freud himself doesn't try to explain all art by his "escape" theory – he also speaks of

¹ Edited by David Jakobsen. The diary entry is kept in the Prior archive at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 7 in a folder containing some of Priors papers on theology. There are good reasons to accept the date written in the entry, 25/3 1942, as the time Prior wrote the entry since the handwriting is Priors own. The title given to the entry, is not in Prior's text, but has been added by the editor. It is in not known whether it was part of a proper diary Prior kept.

² A.F. Mitchell, *Catechisms of the Second Reformation* (London: James Nisbet, 1886)

³ Samuel Rutherford (1600 – 1661). A Presbyterian divine who held a Supralapsarian view on election. Rutherford's theology is dealt with in *Faith, Unbelief and Evil*. (Prior, 2011)

⁴ George Hill (1750 - 1819), *Lectures in Divinity* (1844)

⁵ Adam Gib (1714 – 1788), *Kaina Kai Palaia. Sacred Contemplations: In Three Parts*. Prior was working on a commentary on the book. The project was set back by a fire, and the scrapbook, marked by fire, with Prior's handwritten text is kept at the Bodleian library.

⁶ Thomas Jackson Crawford (1812 – 1875), *The Mysteries of Christianity: Being the Baird Lecture for 1874* (1874).

⁷ Karl Barth's two volumes on Church Dogmatics were very important for Prior's development. This influence is especially noticeable in *Faith, Unbelief and Evil* (Prior, 2011), which is written the same year as the diary entry (see Jakobsen, 2011).

⁸ Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679-1685). Prior considered buying the Latin version.

the striving after beauty as a “sexual striving with an inhibited aim”, or something to that effect – and anyway there’s always the question of why man selects one particular field rather than another as the scene of his “escaping”. Why has one man a mania for collecting paintings, another for collecting shells, another for collecting theological systems? I thought also that I’d find it difficult to explain my new attitude to theology to some of my old friends, such as Alan Richards, and that I would be a bit ashamed before them to describe my present attitude to theology as “aesthetics” or “antiquarian”. And such “shame” could only mean that I shared to some extent their hostility to such an attitude, and I felt there was a certain justice in it. Of course, an atheist’s attitude to theology can never be the same as a Christian’s – he cannot feel himself “inside” the system, working out his relations not merely to man’s belief in God, but to God Himself. And so far as the attack of guys like Richards on an “aesthetics” attitude to theology is an attack on atheism as such, and a demand that one believe, I cannot join in the attack, or feel “guilty” about laying myself open to it. But there would be something wrong about cultivating a purely “escapist” attitude to theology, and I felt the other night that that wasn’t my own attitude anyway. Theology is an illusion, but it is an illusion that is somehow “close to life”, and the study of theological systems illuminates real problems in some way, and that’s why I’m interested in it⁹. The theologian’s “story of man’s redemption” is not just fiction, but real history distorted. Adam Gib’s “Sacred Contemplations”, which tells about the “covenant” made by God with the first man, and the man’s breaking of it, and the “new covenant” brought by Christ, is a distorted version of the same story that Freud tells in “Moses and Monotheism”¹⁰, the story of the “growing-up” of the human race through various psychological crises.

... I felt these thing the other night, and also that useful knowledge would grow out of my collection of theological systems, in good time. I have always been a foe of “dilettantism,” of piecing together a “view of the universe” out of various scraps of knowledge and putting the whole thing forward as an intellectual construction worth looking at. The people who throw real light on “life in general” are the people who don’t make “life in general” their subject, but make themselves experts in a particular line and then drops gems out of the apparently useless mass of knowledge they’ve acquired. For instance, much more is light shed on the bearings of theology on politics by a “pure theologian” like Barth than by these more popular guys who make a vague study of “theology and culture” a special subject – e.g. Berdyaev¹¹. And much more light is shed on the bearing of psychoanalysis on religion by a “pure psychoanalyst” like Freud than by a so called “social and abnormal psychologist” like Jung. They’re all second-rates, these Jungs and Berdyaevs and Huxleys and similar putters-forth of “views of the world”. (Incidentally, a curious fact I’ve noticed is that Uncle Jack’s¹² reading seem to stick to guys of this kind – apart possibly, from works on Far-Eastern questions – and he tends to shy clear of the real big bugs. This is “escapism” if anything is.) And as a reporter I’ve come across really illuminating addresses by guys who burry themselves in

⁹ Here Prior added the sentence: “It is not just fiction, but real history”. This sentence was later crossed out.

¹⁰ *Freud Sigmund, Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Prior also refers to Freud’s book in *Reactions to Determinism* (2011).

¹¹ Nikolai Berdyaev (1874 – 1948).

¹² The handwritten text is unclear here.

some hobby and then speak of sidelights thrown on the common man's problems by this one thing they really know about. (J.B.S. Haldane's like that with his biology). And the other night, I felt that my study of theological systems could have fruitful incidental results like that. I didn't pretend to be able to foresee what they would be – you always get the most fruitful results, I find, by not seeking for them directly but faithfully pursuing an "interest" and letting the "results" just come.

I thought no more after that about the inadequacy of the "escapist" theory of art – I just "left it at that", and didn't attempt to go on formulating a definite "more-than-escapist" theory. I went on simply to accept my "aesthetic" approach to theology as an "aesthetic" approach, without inquiring more fully into what that exactly meant, and tried to compare theological-system-collecting with picture collecting in greater detail. I recollected that I had already in my Christian days compared theological systems with works of art – in the introductory paragraph of an article on Barth's Dogmatics which Lex Miller¹³ tells me will be appearing in "Theology". On that occasion I was stressing the importance of form and structure in theology, of seeing how the bits of a theological system fit together and contribute to the "shape" of the whole thing. And indeed I have always been conscious that this has been my main interest in theology – that my main interest has been in that respect "aesthetic", though as a Christian I wasn't quite at ease about this Then, in this train of thought of the other night, I took a particular theological work, Gib's "Sacred Contemplations", and tried to think what sort of work of art it corresponds to. It's not a very long book this – not an encyclopedia in which all theological questions can be "looked up", as they can in some systems such as Hill's or Barth's – but is astonishingly complete for its size, and beautifully "constructed", so to speak – the way Gib's theology "fits together" is wonderfully well displayed, and one feels that each of his paragraphs has a certain "necessity" about it – each paragraph needs to be there, and nothing is needed in addition. There are probably pictures like that, though I'm not familiar with pictures to call any to mind readily; but I thought of T.E. Hulme's little poems as a pretty good parallel Then I went on to compare the art connoisseur's acquaintance with the distinctive characteristics of different periods in the history of art, with my own similar knowledge in the field of theology. Sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth Calvinism all have their own peculiar and readily recognizable characteristics. Scottish Calvinism in the Elizabethan period – the Calvinism of Knox was boisterous and ebullient. In the next century Scottish divines were more erudite but didn't know how to write or to order their material – they were so entangled in controversy that their works are a maze of controversial cross-fire in which the main drift is hard to discern. In the 18th century they were more dull and less deep, but calm and clear and orderly....

Having thus reflected on the nature of my interest in theological systems, I then began to exercise the said interest, and to look at some of my books. A paragraph in the Westminster Confession of faith (its subject is unimportant, but it was to the effect that the ancient Israelites were "saved" by the work of Christ in just the same way as Christians are today) reminded of a fact about a Calvinistic theology that is not generally appreciated. In the popular mind "Calvinism" means a particular theory about predestination and not much more, but as a matter of fact Calvinism in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, especially in the 17th, consisted of a whole large number of doctrines

¹³ Alexander Miller (1908 – 1960) was a close friend of Prior. Miller had a great influence on Prior's early theological development. They worked together in The Student Christian Movement, of which Miller was president of from 1932 to 1935. (For more see Jakobsen 2011.)

– stock answers to stock questions – on which there was a surprising amount of unanimity in Calvinistic churches and colleges scattered all over Europe and without any centralized authoritative organization. It's a great thing this, to see Confessions of faith, catechisms and theological text-books worked out by each church or college or individual divine in his own way but containing the same basic conclusions on a variety of topics. There's something very impressive about this 17th century Calvinist scholasticism. There's no movement quite like it today, except perhaps Communism, and that has a central organization. It's the sort of loose ideological unity the democratic powers badly need at present, and maybe are in the process of getting as their back are being pressed more against the wall....

After more meditations on the Westminster Confession, my mind wandered to something apparently quite irrelevant, and then a whole of things began to “click”. I remember my first day of reporting at the magistrate's court here, and asking a fellow reporter if it was alright to smoke here. “So long as the Court's not in session”, was his answer; and the idea behind that rule gave me a peculiar thrill. It struck me as a good rule, because it didn't attribute any mystical sanctity to the room in itself, or to Mr. Levrey, the Magistrate, in himself – there was nothing against smoking in Mr. Levrey's presence, and I've done it myself since – but the thing that demanded peculiar behaviour (not smoking) was a social “state of affair” or arrangement – the “constitution” of a Court in Session. There's no superstitious worship of either men or places involved – only respect for a legal and agreed regulation of our behaviour for the time being. And somewhere there, it dawned on me the other night, lies the “soul” of Calvinism. Take the Calvinist doctrine of Holy Communion, for example. Historians of doctrine have long puzzled their heads over Calvin's answer to the question, “Is Christ present in the bread and the wine that have been consecrated by the minister?” Does his obscure language on the point really mean “Yes” with the Romanists or “No” with the Rationalists? Perhaps his real answer can be best stated, in analogy with the reporter's answer to my question “Is smoking forbidden?” as “Yes, but only when the communion service is in session.” The bread and wine are not given some mysterious quality which sticks to them even after the service is over, but during the service they have a peculiar significance because of the arrangement about them which Christ has made with His people. The same general outlook is manifested in the Calvinist justification of infant baptism. “The children of believing parents” are entitled to baptism, not because the faith of the parents is mysteriously inherited by the children, but because it is with families, or rather households, that God has made the “arrangements” which make up the “Christian dispensation”¹⁴ (“children” includes not only physical offspring but all persons under the head of the household's guardianship and guidance – adopted children, servants, anyone; the fact of physical descent is not given any religious significance whatever). This “legal” way of thinking, and attachment of special significance and importance to legal arrangements runs right through Calvinistic theology. Here are a few oddments to substantiate this:

I remember yarning with Harold Miller, librarian at Victoria College, and Anglican of Catholic leanings with a strong distaste and suspicion of Calvinism, just after he had decided to read Calvin for himself, and various “classics” about him. Harold, to do him justice, is pretty good at seizing on

¹⁴ Here Prior first added the sentence:”This 'legal' way of thinking runs right through Calvinistic theology.” This sentence was later crossed out.

the essentials of a subject, and when he was telling me that he thought no more of Calvin after reading him than before, he said that one thing he had learnt that he didn't properly realize before was the importance of the idea of Law and legal concepts generally in Calvin's thought. If I remember rightly my only reply at this time was that Calvin was trained as a lawyer before he became a theologian, and that no doubt influenced the bent of his mind throughout his life. But anyway, there's Harold's unintended testimony for what it's worth. And it's supported by that of J.D. Maurice.